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## Warsaw and Yiddish: Europe's Once Largest Jewish City\*

ווארשע און יידיש: אייראפע'ס אמאל גרעסטע אידישע שטאט

**אבסטראקט:** פֿאַר דער קאַטאַסטראָפֿע (ייִדיש פֿאַר 'חורבן'), האָט וואַרשע פֿונקציאָנירט ווי די וועלט-הויפּטשטאָט פֿון ייִדיש-שלאַנד, אָדער די אַשכּנזישע ציוויליזאַציע פֿון דער ייִדישער שפּראַך און קולטור. אין די טערמינען פֿון אַבסאָלוט נומער פֿון אידישע באַוווינער, אין די אָנהייב פֿון די 02 יאָרהונדערט, ניו יארק סיטי איז איבער וואַרשע. אָבער פֿון דער פּערספּעקטיוו פֿון קולטורעלע און פּאָליטישע אינסטיטוציעס און אָרגאַניזאַציעס, איז וואַרשע פֿאַרביבן דער צענטער פֿון איראָפּעיִשן ייִדישן לעבן. דער אַרטיקל אָפּפּערס אָן איבערבליק פֿון די העכערונג פֿון וואַרשע ווי אַזאַ אַ צענטער און זײַן צעשטערונג בעשאַס דער צווייטער וועלט מלחמה. דערנאָך ווערט דער טיילווייז אויפֿלעב פֿון דעם צענטער אַנגאַליזירט נאָך 1945. צום באַדויערן, האָט די אַנטיסעמיטישע עטנישע רייניקונג פֿון די לעצטע ייִדישע קהילות אין פּוילן אין 1968 חרובֿ געווען דעם צענטער. נאָכן פֿאַל פֿון קאַמוניזם, האָט זיך אין די לעצטע יאָרצענדליק אַנטוויקלט אַ נייער באַוואוסטזיין וועגן דער ייִדישער אויסמעסטונג פֿון דער קולטור און געשיכטע פֿון וואַרשע און פּוילן. דאָס איז אַ געלעגנהייט פֿאַר אַ נייער עפֿענונג, צו אַרומנעמען די ייִדישע קולטור, ייִדיש און ייִדישקייט ווי איינגעבונדענע עלעמענטן פֿון דער פּוילישער קולטור און געשיכטע. די געשיכטע און קולטור פֿון דעם לאַנד איז נישט באשאפן אויסשליסלעך דורך קאַטהאָליקס, ווייל עטהענאָאַטיאַנאַליסץ זענען נישט פֿאָדערן פֿאַלש. דערביי, דער עסיי איז בדעה צו דינען ווי אַ קערעקטיוו צו דעם אַנאַקאָניסטיק פּריקאַנסעפּשאַן.

**טערמינען:** עטנאָלינגוויסטיק נאַציאָנאַליזם, שפּראַך פּאָליטיק, שריפט פּאָליטיק, וואַרשע, ייִדיש

varshe un yidish: eyrape's amal greste idishe shtat

**abstrakt:** far der *katastrofe* (yidish far 'khubn'), hot varshe funktsyonirt vi di velt-hoyptshtot fun yidishland, oder di ashkhnzische tsivilizatsye fun der yidisher shprakh un kultur. in di terminen fun absolut numer fun idishe bavoyner, in di onheyb fun di 20 yorhundert, niu yark siti iz iber varshe. ober fun der perspektiv fun kulturele un politishe institutsyes un organizatsyes, iz varshe farblibn der tsenter fun eyropeishn yidishn lebn. der artikl offers

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an iberblik fun di hekherung fun varshe vi aza a tsefter un zayn tseshterung beshas der tsveyter velt mlkhhm. dernokh vert der teylvayz aoyfleb fun dem tsefter analizirt nokh 1945. tsum badoyern, hot di antisemitishe etnishe reynikung fun di letste yidishe khilus in poyln in 1968 khruv geven dem tsefter. nokhn fal fun komunizm, hot zikh in di letste yortsendlik antviklt a nayer bavaustzeyn vegn der yidisher aoysmestung fun der kultur aun geshikhte fun varshe aun poyln. dos iz a gelegenheyft far a nayer efenung, tsu arumnemen di yidishe kultur, yidish un yidishkeyt vi aygebundene elementn fun der poylisher kultur aun geshikhte. di geshikhte un kultur fun dem land iz nisht bashafn aoysshlislekh durkh katholiks, vayl ethnonationalists zenen nisht fodern falsh. deriber, der esey iz bdeh tsu dinen vi a kerektiv tsu dem anakhronistik prikanshephan.

**terminen:** etnolingoystik natsyonalizm, shprakh politik, shrift politik, varshe, yidish

This is not a typical research article, but more of a free-flowing essay on Warsaw's unique place in Yiddishland, or the lost homeland of Central Europe's Ashkenazim, that is, Yiddish-speaking Jews. Although it must be borne in mind that many of these Jews identified also (or even solely) as citizens of their states of residence, or in other words as Poles (Polish citizens) in the case of Warsaw. After 1918, the rise of the region's ethnolinguistically defined nation-states obscured the existence of Yiddishland in the eyes of non-Jews, while the Holocaust sealed its demise. Later, antisemitic policies rife across the Soviet bloc erased a tentative remembrance of Yiddishland that still lingered. Likewise, this ethnolinguistically underpinned division of Central Europe into stiffly homogenous "compartments" of national polities made the once multicultural Warsaw into a lesser city. The Central European metropolis of Yiddishland was destroyed and forgotten, casting Warsaw in the one-dimensional – and thus, rather provincial – role of the capital only of the Polish nation-state.

The past is a mixed bag. Warsaw now is the capital of Poland. It is a fact. Yet, it was also the third largest city of the Russian Empire. This is also a fact, though less well known among the population at large in today's Polish nation-state, which emerged only in 1918. What also needs to be emphasized is that this national state is *not* a continuation of Poland-Lithuania.<sup>1</sup> But who nowadays remembers that Warsaw used to be the cultural and political capital of Yiddishland, which extended from the Baltic in the north to the Black Sea littoral in the south, and from Berlin in the west to Moscow in the east? The past is quicksands that reveal as much as they conceal. It depends on today's observers, Poland's decision makers and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Tomasz Kamusella, *The Un-Polish Poland, 1989 and the Illusion of Regained Historical Continuity* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, an imprint of Springer, 2017).

elite, alongside the inhabitants of the country and Warsaw, what they may want to perceive and choose to forget. It remains to be seen whether they wish to become part of multicultural Europe and the globalized world, or would rather remain wed to the narrow-minded national communist ideal of an ethnolinguistically and confessionally homogenous Poland for ethnic Poles only, or Catholics who are monolingual in Polish, and prefer *not* to remember about any Yiddishland.<sup>2</sup>

For this essay Warsaw affords a useful lens through which to observe the past and (however tenuous) present of Yiddish culture and language. Both elements constitute the “raw material” from which Ashkenazim built their once vibrant country and civilization of Yiddishland, in spite of antisemitism and other prejudices stacked against them. This land never formally featured on any political map of Europe, though in present-day scholarship, the social, political, cultural, and economic reality of Yiddishland is widely acknowledged<sup>3,4</sup> and even evoked on some historical maps.<sup>5,6</sup> Warsaw, as the capital of Yiddishland, permits to brush away a whole dune of forgetting, so that a peek becomes possible at the typically unseen Jewish, but integral, half of this city.<sup>7</sup> When readers have come to see what earlier used to be consigned to oblivion by World War II, the Holocaust and antisemitism, it is now their choice whether to act on this newly found awareness and embrace this previously repressed Yiddishland aspect of Polish or European past, or not.<sup>8</sup> Their decision will have salient ramifications for Poland's future, as the previous generations' resolve to forget Yiddishland has had on the current readers' present. Hopefully, in some small way, this essay can inform such a decision of import.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Marcin Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm. Nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Trio, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Alain Brossat and Sylvia Klingberg, *Revolutionary Yiddishland: A History of Jewish Radicalism*, trans. from the French by David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Gérard Silvain and Henri Minczeles, *Yiddishland* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Agata Reibach and Tomasz Kamusella, “tsentral-eyrope in 1910: Yiddish Geography,” in *Words in Space and Time: A Historical Atlas of Language Politics in Modern Central Europe*, by Tomasz Kamusella (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2021), 72–74, accessed December 12, 2021, <https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/3024963>.

<sup>6</sup> Marcin Wodzinski and Waldemar Spallek, *Historical Atlas of Hasidism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Paweł Fijałkowski ed., *Warsze – Warszawa. Żydzi w historii miasta 1414–2014* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny im. Emanuela Ringelbluma, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Rafał Betlejewski, “Projekt ‘Tęsknię za Tobą Żydzie’” (2021), accessed December 13, 2021, <https://zrzutka.pl/9yspw>.

## Ethnolinguistic nationalism and antisemitism

At the turn of the 20th century, but especially in the wake of the Great War, Central Europe was in the grip of rapid nation-making. In this part of the continent the nation was defined as a given language's speech community. All the speakers of a specific language were seen as belonging to a single nation.<sup>9</sup> Hence, in this view, all the speakers of the Polish language constituted the Polish nation, or those speaking German – the German nation.<sup>10</sup> Following the breakup of Central Europe's multi-ethnic (and poly-confessional) empires of Austria-Hungary, the Ottomans or Russia, the Allies provided such ethnolinguistic nations with their own nation-states. The Hungarians received independent Hungary, the Latvians – independent Latvia, or the Poles – independent Poland. When for economic and political reasons, a need appeared to house two ethnolinguistic nations in a single polity, as in the case of the Czechs and Slovaks in Czechoslovakia, they were proclaimed to be a single nation of Czechoslovaks, their two languages melded into the composite one of Czechoslovak.<sup>11</sup>

In all this geopolitical commotion, following the long-standing European tradition of antisemitism, the Jews were forgotten, again. The “reason” was that in the wake of the French Revolution, religion was to become a person's private matter across the “civilized world,” or the West. As a result, Jews – like Catholics, Muslims, Orthodox Christians, or Protestants – were

<sup>9</sup> Leon Dominian, *The Frontiers of Language and Nationality in Europe* (London: Constable and Company and New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1917) (published for the American Geographical Society of New York).

<sup>10</sup> Because *Wortfolge* is a journal devoted to culture and history in the German-language countries, I need to comment on the old chestnut of the existence of the German-speaking nation-state of Austria. This case appears to fly into the face of the Central European norm of legitimate statehood that equates one language with one nation, and in turn with a single nation-state for such an ethnolinguistically defined nation. But this development must be viewed in the context of both world wars. The vast majority of interwar Austria's German-speakers identified themselves as Germans, and collectively as part of the German nation. Most even disdained the idea of an Austrian nation, as imposed from outside by the victorious Allies. Yet, the exigencies of the postwar events after 1918 and 1945 effectively prevented the inclusion of the Austrians within the ethnolinguistically German nation, finally leading to the permanent rise of self-aware Austrian nation during the cold war period. Now, it is the Austrian territory and its history, not the German language, that define the Austrian nation (cf. Ernst Bruckmüller, *The Austrian Nation Cultural Consciousness and Socio-political Processes* (Ser: Studies in Austrian Literature, Culture, and Thought) (Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Tomasz Kamusella, “The Political Expediency of Language-Making in Central Europe: The Case of Czechoslovak,” *Studia Slavica / Slovanské Studie* [Yearbook, ed. by Jana Raclavská and Aleksandra Wieczorek], vol. 11 (2007): 217–222, Opole: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego and Ostrava: Ostravská univerzita.

apportioned to this or that nation on the basis of language, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. No nation-state was planned for Judaists, or confessors of the Jewish religion (Judaism), as none was founded specifically for Catholics or Muslims. Yet, time and again antisemitism derailed this Enlightenment program of simultaneous emancipation and (mainly ethnolinguistic) assimilation for Europe's Jews. The Dreyfus affair (1894–1906) in France clearly showed that the powers that be de facto saw Frenchmen of the Jewish religion as *insufficiently* French in comparison to Catholic or Protestant Frenchmen. Likewise, Polish nationalists explicitly excluded Polish-speakers of the Jewish religion from the Polish nation, seeing them as *incapable* of being “true Poles,” as an inherently “foreign element,” despite the fact that they had lived alongside Polish-speaking Christians for a millennium.<sup>12</sup> That is how strong the influence of the official status of *inorodtsy* (инородцы ‘aliens’, literally ‘born abroad’) for Russia's Jews remained on the 19th-century Polish political thinking and national movement.<sup>13</sup> Yet, all the constitutions of the Polish nation-state (founded in 1918) have invariably defined the Polish nations as all Polish *citizens*, *irrespective* of language, ethnicity (nationality), or religion.<sup>14</sup>

## תּוּאַלְשׁײַט Yiddishland

In 1900, out of the world's 11 million Jews, 7.5 million lived in Central Europe. Around four-fifths of the latter number resided in the lands of the former Poland-Lithuania, or overwhelmingly in Russia's Pale of Settlement and Austria-Hungary's Galicia. Out of Central Europe's Jews, 7.3 million Ashkenazim spoke Yiddish (‘Jewish German’), while the remaining 200,000 Sephardim – Spanyol (‘Jewish Spanish’). At the turn of the 20th century, Warsaw (Varshava in Russian, Warszawa in Polish), then located in the Russian Empire, with 219,000 Jews among its inhabitants, was the *largest* Jewish city in all of Europe. Ashkenazim accounted for a third of

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Roman Dmowski, *Myśli nowoczesnego Polaka* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Zachodnie, 1943 [1903]), 67–70, 80, 183, accessed November 30, 2020, [https://pl.wikisource.org/wiki/My%C5%9Bli\\_nowoczesnego\\_Polaka](https://pl.wikisource.org/wiki/My%C5%9Bli_nowoczesnego_Polaka).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Jerzy Jedlicki, “Resisting the Wave: Intellectuals against Antisemitism in the Last Years of the ‘Polish Kingdom’,” in *Antisemitism and Its Opponents in Modern Poland*, ed. Robert Blobaum (Ithaca, NJ: Cornell University Press, 2005), 60–80.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ustawa z dnia 17 marca 1921 roku, Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (Warsaw: Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 1921), Art. 95, accessed November 30, 2020, Art 95. [https://pl.wikisource.org/wiki/Konstytucja\\_marcowa\\_\(1921\)](https://pl.wikisource.org/wiki/Konstytucja_marcowa_(1921)).

the city's inhabitants. In this statistics, Warsaw was followed by Budapest with 166,000 Jews, Vienna (147,000) and Odessa (139,000). Yet, Jews accounted only for a quarter of the Hungarian capital's population and for less than a tenth of the inhabitants in the Austrian capital, though, like in Warsaw, for a third of the residents in the then Russian Black Sea city port of Odessa (nowadays, Odesa in Ukraine). Higher percentages of Jews among an urban population were observed in Vilna (41 percent) that currently serves as the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius, and in Salonika (56 percent), or present-day Greece's second largest city of Thessaloniki. However, in the latter case, it must be remembered that these Jews were Sephardim, *not* Ashkenazim. The largest towns where Ashkenazim constituted a clear-cut *majority* of the population, included, Minsk (52 percent, now Belarus's capital of Miensk), Iași (58 percent, Romania), Belostok (Białystok, 63 percent, nowadays in Poland), or Berdichev (Berdychiv, 78 percent, at present in Ukraine).<sup>15</sup>

The number of Jews in Warsaw grew from 7,000 (8 percent) in 1792 when the city still served as the capital of Poland-Lithuania, to 16,000 (19 percent) in 1816, or in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, when it became the regional capital of Russia's "Congress" Kingdom of Poland. By 1864, numbering 73,000 (33 percent), Jews had added up to a third of Warsaw's inhabitants. As then Russia's third largest city,<sup>16</sup> Warsaw attracted a lot of business and workers from across the empire's western borderlands. Accordingly, the number of the city's Jews grew fast to 99,000 (32 percent) in 1876, 136,000 (33 percent) in 1886, 210,000 (34 percent) in 1897, and subsequently by more than a half to 337,000 in 1914. Prior to the outbreak of the Great War, Jews reached the highest-ever share in the Warsavian population, at 38 percent.<sup>17,18</sup>

But from the perspective of the globe, at the same time, New York successfully "usurped" Warsaw's position as the world's largest Jewish

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Robert Magocsi, *Historical Atlas of Central Europe* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2002), 107–109.

<sup>16</sup> The ranking of Russia's largest cities in 1900: St Petersburg (1.26m), Moscow (1m), Warsaw (0.68m), Odessa (0.4m), Lodz (today, Łódź in Poland, 0.3m), Riga (Rīga, Latvia's capital, 0.28m), Kiev (Kyiv, Ukraine's capital, 0.25m). See: "Russia in 1900," Spartacus Educational, accessed December 3, 2020, <https://spartacus-educational.com/RUS1900.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> Antony Polonsky, "Warsaw: World War I and After," in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, accessed November 30, 2020, <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Warsaw#id0eoeac>.

<sup>18</sup> Herman Rosenthal, J. G. Lipman, and Judah David Eisenstein, "Warsaw," in *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906), accessed December 3, 2020, [www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14783-warsaw](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14783-warsaw).

city. In 1880, already 80,000 Jews lived in this North American metropolis.<sup>19</sup> The 1881 assassination of Tsar Alexander II led to a sudden spike in pogroms and antisemitic persecution (also in Warsaw<sup>20</sup>), triggering an unprecedented wave of Jewish emigrants. In the following four decades and a half, 2.5 million Ashkenazim left Russia<sup>21</sup> (and also Austria-Hungary) for the United States.<sup>22</sup> New York's Jewish population jumped eightfold to 600,000 in 1900.<sup>23</sup> Hence, this city definitively took over Warsaw in the overall number of Jewish residents around the late 1880s. Yet, Jews as a community remained more visible in the latter city, because in 1900 they constituted only 17 percent of the New Yorkers.<sup>24</sup> Soon, even this difference between Warsaw and New York began to blur. Prior to the outbreak of the Great War, already 1.3 million Ashkenazim lived in New York,<sup>25</sup> accounting for a quarter of the city's population.<sup>26</sup>

## וואַרשע Varshe

The 1905 Revolution triggered democratization in the Russian Empire, alongside a certain relaxation of the program of Russification that had commenced, on a large scale, in European Russia in the 1880s. As a result, a space opened for the public use of other languages than Russian – including,

<sup>19</sup> Tanaisia Morris, "Tracing the History of Jewish Immigrants and Their Impact on New York City," *Fordham News*, December 12, 2017, accessed November 30, 2020, <https://news.fordham.edu/inside-fordham/faculty-reads/tracing-history-jewish-immigrants-impact-new-york-city/>.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Agnieszka Friedrich, "The Image of the Warsaw Pogrom of 1881 in Late Nineteenth-Century Polish Literature," *East European Jewish Affairs*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2010): 154–157.

<sup>21</sup> These Jewish emigrants stemmed overwhelmingly from the Pale of Settlement, or in other words, from Russia's western borderlands that today constitute the ethnolinguistic nation-states of Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, eastern Poland, and central and eastern Ukraine.

<sup>22</sup> Lauren Price, "Mapping the Evolution of the Lower East Side Through a Jewish Lens, 1880–2014," *6sqft*. September 19, 2014, accessed November 30, 2020, <https://www.6sqft.com/mapping-the-evolution-of-the-lower-east-side-through-a-jewish-lens-1880-2014/>.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Chalmers, "The Number of Jews in New York City," *Publications of the American Statistical Association*, vol. 14, no. 105 (1914): 69, accessed November 30, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2965089.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Chalmers, "The Number," 69.

<sup>25</sup> Chalmers, "The Number," 75.

<sup>26</sup> W. M. Steuart, *Census of Manufactures, 1914* (Vol. 1: *Reports by States with Statistics for Principal Cities and Metropolitan Districts*) (Washington, DC: Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1918), 963.

Yiddish – across the empire’s multi-ethnic western borderlands. The Yiddish-language press, politics, and Yiddish-medium schools<sup>27</sup> developed rapidly. And again, Warsaw was at the forefront of these achievements.<sup>28</sup> The Great War did not roll back the trends, but actually encouraged them. In 1915 the defeated Russian armies retreated from the empire’s western borderlands. In an unprecedented feat of the half-forced evacuation, the area’s administrators and elite were pulled back to the hinterland, together with a huge segment of the population, mostly Orthodox Christians, but not only.<sup>29</sup> While the Orthodox population was evacuated ostensibly for their own safety, Jews – equated with the Germans through their Germanic language of Yiddish (or ‘Jewish German’) – were removed from the border area as a “security risk.”<sup>30</sup> The incoming German and Austro-Hungarian occupation administrations, first of all, banned the use of Russian (and Cyrillic) in official capacity. Instead, Polish and German were introduced in this function, alongside the area’s local languages. In this manner, for the first time in history, Yiddish became an official language – side by side with Belarusian, Latvian and Lithuanian – in Germany’s semi-colony or semi-puppet state of Land Ober Ost (coterminous with the historical Grand Duchy of Lithuania).<sup>31</sup> Yet, in the interwar period, the co-official status of Yiddish was retained in 1924–1938 only in the quadrilingual Soviet Belarus, where also Belarusian, Polish, and Russian were employed in official use.<sup>32,33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> The first-ever Yiddish-medium secular Jewish schools opened in breach of tsarist bans in Mir (today in Belarus; 1898), Warsaw (1899) and Nesvizh (Niasviž, today in Belarus; 1900). Yet, the post-1905 democratization allowed for building a full-fledged network of such schools across the Pale of Settlement prior to the outbreak of the Great War. Their number multiplied under German occupation during this war (Elisa Schulman, *A History of Jewish Education in the Soviet Union* (Ser: The Philip W. Lown Graduate Center for Contemporary Jewish Studies, Institute for East European Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, Vol. 4) (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1971), 18–25.)

<sup>28</sup> Scott Ury, *Barricades and Banners: The Revolution of 1905 and the Transformation of Warsaw Jewry* (Ser: Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>30</sup> Agnieszka Prymaka-Oniszcz, *Bieżeństwo 1915. Zapomniani uchodźcy* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Sieben-Sprachen-Wörterbuch Deutsch / Polnisch / Russisch / Weißruthenisch / Litauisch / Lettisch / Jiddisch* (Leipzig: Presseabteilung des Oberbefehlshabers Ost and Otto Spamer, 1918).

<sup>32</sup> Alla Andreevna Kozhinova, “Jazyki i graficheskie sistemy Belarusi v period ot Oktjabrskoi revolutsii do Vtoroi mirovoi voiny,” *Studi Slavistici*, vol. 14 (2017): 133–156.

<sup>33</sup> Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevnik Experiment in Minsk* (Ser: The Modern Jewish Experience) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 2013).



Between the two world wars, due to constant emigration, the number of Warsaw's Jews remained largely unchanged, after the city became the capital of the newly founded Polish nation-state. Increasing antisemitism, together with the deepening lack of accommodation for the culture, languages and economic needs of Poles of the Jewish religion or extraction convinced many of them to leave en masse, be it to the Americas,<sup>34</sup> Britain's mandatory Palestine,<sup>35</sup> or Western Europe.<sup>36</sup> For instance, not a single Yiddish- or Hebrew-medium school was founded by the state in interwar Poland; the matter was left to the discretion of municipalities.<sup>37</sup> In Warsaw, the municipality supported the Jewish schools, but the annual grant-in-aid was gradually reduced after 1927 until it was completely withdrawn in the school year 1934–1935,<sup>38</sup> when antisemitism was openly accepted into the country's politics and legislation.<sup>39</sup> Yet, across interwar Poland, in 1921, Jews constituted the majority of the urban population<sup>40</sup> in the east of the country (today's south-eastern Lithuania, and western Belarus and Ukraine), the plurality of the urban inhabitants in the center (present-day eastern Poland), and the second largest ethnic group of city and town dwellers in western Poland (today's central Poland).<sup>41,42</sup> In the late 1930s, indiscriminate beatings of Jews, targeted destruction of Jewish property, exclusion of Jews from universities<sup>43</sup> and from practicing law or medicine became a new antisemitic norm.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Anna Pamuła, *Polacos. Chajka płynie do Kostaryki* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2017).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Karolina Przewrocka-Aderet, *Polanim. Z Polski do Izraela* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2019).

<sup>36</sup> Irith Cherniavsky, "The Emigration of Polish Jews in the 1930s," in *Jewish Population and Identity* (Ser: Studies of Jews in Society, Vol. 1), eds. Sergio DellaPergola and Uzi Rebhun (Cham: Springer, 2018), 195–211.

<sup>37</sup> Shimon Frost, *Schooling as a Socio Political Expression: Jewish Education in Interwar Poland* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1999), 19, 147.

<sup>38</sup> Miriam Eisenstein, *Jewish Schools in Poland, 1919–39: Their Philosophy and Development* (New York: King's Crown Press and Columbia University, 1950), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Anna K. Kłys, *Tajemnica Pana Cukra. Polsko-żydowska wojna przed wojną* (Warsaw: Wielka Litera, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Some towns in interwar Poland were almost homogenously Jewish with Yiddish as the dominant language of everyday communication, education and business (cf. Rafał Hetman, *Izbica, Izbica* (Ser: Sulina) (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2021)).

<sup>41</sup> Eisenstein, *Jewish Schools in Poland, 1919–39*, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Hetman, *Izbica, Izbica*.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Monika Natkowska, *Numerus clausus, getto ławkowe, numerus nullus, „paragraf aryjski”: antysemityzm na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim 1931–1939* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 1999).

<sup>44</sup> Szyja Bronsztejn, *Ludność żydowska w Polsce w okresie międzywojennym. Studium statystyczne* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1963), 262.

To many observers, the scale of violence approached the threshold of a civil war.<sup>45</sup>

Still during the Great War, in memory of the giant of Yiddish letters, Yitskhok Leybush Peretz יצחק לייבוש פרץ (1852–1915), who had died a year earlier, in 1916, sixty Yiddish writers and journalists established an Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists in Warsaw און זשורנאליסטן אין ווארשע (ע) *Fareyn fun Yidishe Shreyber un Zhurnalistsn in Varshe*).<sup>46</sup> In 1927, the International PEN Club decided to accord the status of National Yiddish PEN Center on this Association, despite the organization's regulations that prohibited founding more than a single PEN center in a given country.<sup>47</sup> Uniquely, interwar Warsaw was the world's only city that served as the joint seat of two linguistically differentiated PEN centers – Polish and Yiddish.<sup>48</sup> However, unlike the Polish PEN Center, its Yiddish counterpart enjoyed a branch in New York City.<sup>49</sup> The Yiddish PEN Center put Warsaw on the world's map, but this rare distinction made no impression on the Polish authorities.<sup>50</sup> Neither the state, nor Warsaw supported Yiddish education, culture, let alone research. Lacking a Yiddish-medium university, in 1925, Yiddish scholars and scientists decided to found an Institute for Jewish Research (אינסטיטוט וויסנשאַפֿטלעכער אינסטיטוט) *Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut*, יוויא (YIVO). However, they chose Wilno (Vilnius) for YIVO's seat, *not* Warsaw.<sup>51</sup> YIVO survives to this day in New York, but unfortunately, the Yiddish PEN center did not revive after the Second World War. Last

<sup>45</sup> Kłys, *Tajemnica Pana Cukra*.

<sup>46</sup> Nathan Cohen, "Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists in Warsaw," in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (2020), accessed December 9, 2020, [https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Association\\_of\\_Jewish\\_Writers\\_and\\_Journalists\\_in\\_Warsaw](https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Association_of_Jewish_Writers_and_Journalists_in_Warsaw).

<sup>47</sup> "International Pen Club Admits Jewish Writers," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, June 22, 1927, accessed December 9, 2020, <https://www.jta.org/1927/06/22/archive/international-pen-club-admits-jewish-writers>.

<sup>48</sup> Zusman Segalowicz, *Tłomackie 13 (Z unicestwionej przeszłości). Wspomnienia o Żydowskim Związku Literatów i Dziennikarzy w Polsce (1919–1939)*, trans. from the Yiddish into Polish by Michał Friedman (Ser: Biblioteka Pisarzy Żydowskich) (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 2001).

<sup>49</sup> Formally, the Yiddish PEN Center had its main seat in Wilno (Vilnius, today the capital of Lithuania) (cf. "Seek to Revive Yiddish Pen Club in London," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, February 13, 1941, accessed March 27, 2022, <https://www.jta.org/archive/seek-to-revive-yiddish-pen-club-in-london>).

<sup>50</sup> Zusman Segalowicz, *Tłomackie 13 (z unicestwionej przeszłości). Wspomnienia o Żydowskim Związku Literatów i Dziennikarzy w Polsce (1919–1939)*, trans. from the Yiddish into Polish by Michał Friedman (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Austeria, 2022).

<sup>51</sup> Cecile Esther Kuznitz, "YIVO," in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, accessed December 9, 2020, <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/YIVO>.

but not least, in the first half of the 20th century, Yiddish-language theater and film became a global business with New York and Warsaw as its main centers.<sup>52</sup>

In the wake of World War I, the number of Jewish Warsovians plummeted to 310,000 (33 percent) in 1921. Subsequently, it climbed back to 352,000 (30 percent) a decade later, before reaching 379,000 (29 percent) in 1939. However, the share of Jews among the Polish capital's inhabitants steadily declined until the outbreak of World War II.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, by 1940, the number of Jews had reached the mark of 2 million in New York.<sup>54</sup> Comparatively speaking, this New York statistics better corresponded to *all* Poland's Jews. By the declaration of the Jewish religion, in 1931, 3.1 million Jews lived in Poland, though from the perspective of language this translated into 2.5 million Yiddish- and 240,000 Hebrew-speakers,<sup>55</sup> the rest being speakers of Polish, alongside German and Russian.<sup>56</sup>

## קאַטאַסטראָפּע **Katastrofe**

In September 1939 the forces of the allied totalitarian powers of Germany and the Soviet Union launched a two-pronged onslaught on Poland, and thus commenced World War II. Warsaw found itself in Berlin's zone of occupation. A year later, in the fall of 1940, the German authorities created a ghetto in the midst of Warsaw. Non-Jews were compelled to leave this area, while all the Jews of the Polish capital and the vicinity were forced into this designated area of isolation. Over 400,000 people

<sup>52</sup> Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

<sup>53</sup> Polonsky, "Warsaw."

<sup>54</sup> Virtual Jewish World: New York State, United States (2020), accessed November 30, 2020, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/new-york-state-jewish-history>.

<sup>55</sup> Obviously, at that time, the declaration of Hebrew was rather political than actual in its character. Most nominal Hebrew-speakers continued speaking and writing in Yiddish or Polish, though many made the point of learning Hebrew in order to be able to hold a rudimentary conversation in this language. The choice of Hebrew emphasized their loyalty to the political program of Zionism, namely, to the aspiration of founding a Jewish nation-state in Palestine. In line with Central Europe's norm of ethnolinguistic nationalism, they hoped to make Hebrew (*not* Yiddish) into the nation-state's sole national and official language.

<sup>56</sup> *Drugi powszechny spis ludności z dn. 9.XII 1931 r. Mieszkania i gospodarstwa domowe ludność* (Warsaw: Główny Urząd Statystyczny Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 1938), 15, accessed November 30, 2020, [https://web.archive.org/web/20140902093351/http://statlibr.stat.gov.pl/exlibris/aleph/a18\\_1/apache\\_media/VUNVGMLANSCQFGYHCN3VDLk12A9U5.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20140902093351/http://statlibr.stat.gov.pl/exlibris/aleph/a18_1/apache_media/VUNVGMLANSCQFGYHCN3VDLk12A9U5.pdf).

were crammed into this area's mere three square kilometers,<sup>57</sup> yielding the unbelievable population density of 138,000 inhabitants per square kilometer.<sup>58</sup> By comparison, Tokyo's busiest and most densely populated ward of Shibuya boasts 15,000 people per square kilometer,<sup>59</sup> while the Philippine capital Manila, deemed to be the world's most densely populated city, records a "mere" 42,000 inhabitants per square kilometer.<sup>60</sup> (However, in India Mumbai's slum of Dharavi suffers the staggering population density of 277,000 people per square kilometer.<sup>61</sup>)

Given the vicious spike in prewar antisemitism, some naively believed that ghettos created by Germans would offer a modicum of Jewish statehood or cultural autonomy in occupied Poland.<sup>62</sup> Soon enough, Nazi ghettos turned out to be an instrument for robbing and gathering Jews for the purpose of their ultimate extermination. Warsaw was truncated into two cities. Roughly half of the population lived in the Yiddish-speaking ghetto, facing the increasingly undeniable reality of the Holocaust. Meanwhile, the other – "gentile" and Polish-speaking – half enjoyed relatively "normal" life, and mostly chose to turn a blind eye to what was going on in the ghetto.<sup>63</sup> Prior to the final liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943, the remaining Jews staged an unexpected uprising,<sup>64</sup> which the majority of gentile Warsawians chose *not* to notice.<sup>65</sup> The ghetto was razed to the ground, while its inhabitants perished in the death camps of Treblinka and Majdanek. Escapees from closely watched train transports could not count on gentiles'

<sup>57</sup> Ruta Sakowska, *Ludzie z dzielnicy zamkniętej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1993), 45.

<sup>58</sup> "Warsaw," in *Holocaust Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2020), accessed December 3, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/warsaw>.

<sup>59</sup> "Shibuya," in *Wikipedia* (2020), accessed December 3, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shibuya>.

<sup>60</sup> "List of Cities Proper by Population Density," in *Wikipedia* (2020), accessed December 3, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_cities\\_proper\\_by\\_population\\_density](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cities_proper_by_population_density).

<sup>61</sup> "Dharavi," in *Wikipedia* (2020), accessed December 3, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dharavi>.

<sup>62</sup> Andrzej Sitarek, *Wire Bound State Structure and Functions of the Jewish Administration of the Łódź Ghetto*, trans. from the Polish by Katarzyna Gucio (Ser: Biblioteka Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej w Łodzi, Vol. 45) (Łódź and Warszawa: Institute of National Remembrance, Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation, 2017).

<sup>63</sup> Jan Błoński, *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto* (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2013).

<sup>64</sup> Marek Edelman, *The Ghetto Fights: Warsaw, 1941–43* (London: Bookmarks Publications, 1990).

<sup>65</sup> Paweł Wojewódka, "Polacy wobec Żydów w getcie: była i 'spora obojętność,'" *Polskie Radio: Jedyńka*, April 19, 2013, accessed December 9, 2020, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/7/1691/Artykul/827303,Polacy-wobec-Zydow-w-getcie-byla-i-spora-obojetnosc>.

help. Such Christian help for those in need was a rare, and often traumatic,<sup>66</sup> occurrence. In most cases, Catholic Polish co-citizens preferred to “hunt down” Polish co-citizens of the Jewish religion,<sup>67</sup> motivated by the German occupation authorities’ normalization of antisemitism and also by paltry pecuniary rewards that the Germans offered.<sup>68</sup>

In the following year of 1944, the Catholic Warsovians organized their own uprising. They hoped to liberate the Polish capital in time for welcoming to the city the rapidly advancing Red Army. But the Soviets bided their time on the opposite bank of the Vistula, allowing the Germans to squash the uprising and to level Warsaw.<sup>69</sup> Eerily, in this planned and thorough destruction, the Catholic Warsaw suffered a fate similar to the Warsaw Ghetto (obviously, less extermination). The Germans emptied the destroyed city of its population, who were subsequently herded into concentration camps.<sup>70</sup>

Has the twin fate of both Warsaws taught the surviving Catholic inhabitants a lesson enough? Unfortunately, not. Holocaust survivors were *not* welcomed back to their hometowns. Catholic neighbors had already taken over their houses and seized movable property, on the assumption that not a single Jew would survive the Katastrofe.<sup>71,72</sup> Instead, survivors were beaten, chased away and often murdered<sup>73</sup> in cold blood.<sup>74</sup> Jewish children who survived in Catholic families were released to their kin or co-ethnics

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Aránzazu Calderón Puerta, “Motyw gwałtu w opowiadaniach *Aryjskie papiery* Idy Fink i w dramacie *Nasza klasa* Tadeusza Słobodzianka,” *Teksty Drugie*, no. 2 (2015): 201–214, accessed December 9, 2020, [http://rcin.org.pl/Content/62417/WA248\\_80877\\_P-I-2524\\_puerta-motyw\\_o.pdf](http://rcin.org.pl/Content/62417/WA248_80877_P-I-2524_puerta-motyw_o.pdf).

<sup>67</sup> Jan Grabowski, *Judenjagd. Polowanie na Żydów 1942–1945. Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu* (Warsaw: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011).

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Heinrich Himmler, “Himmler’s Posen Speech – ‘Extermination’ (October 4, 1943),” Jewish Virtual Library (1943), accessed December 9, 2020, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/himmler-s-posen-speech-quot-extermination-quot>.

<sup>69</sup> Stanisław Kopf, *Wyrok na miasto. Warszawskie Termopile 1944–1945* (Warszawa: Fundacja „Wystawa Warszawa Walczy 1939–1945” and Wydawnictwo „Askon”, 2001).

<sup>70</sup> “Ludność Warszawy była wysiedlana z miasta już podczas powstania,” *Gazeta Prawna*, October 2, 2018, accessed December 9, 2020, <https://kultura.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/1284898,ludnosc-warszawy-byla-wysiedlana-juz-podczas-powstania.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Łukasz Krzyżanowski, *Dom, którego nie było. Powroty ocalałych do powojennego* (Ser: Historia) (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2016).

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Łukasz Krzyżanowski, *Ghost Citizens: Jewish Return to a Postwar City*, trans. from the Polish by Madeline G. Levine (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

<sup>73</sup> Andrzej Nowak-Arczewski, *Zmituj się nad nami* (Warsaw: Prószyński i S-ka, 2017).

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Mordechaj Canin, *Przez ruiny i zgliszczca. Podróż po stu zgładzonych gminach żydowskich w Polsce*, trans. from the Yiddish into Polish by Monika Adamczyk-Grabowska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Nisza, 2018).

often only at a hefty payment.<sup>75</sup> Some Catholic “neighbors”<sup>76</sup> would not leave even the Jewish dead in peace, and instead dug and panned ashes<sup>77</sup> for gold and money in former extermination camps and around them.<sup>78</sup> Unfortunately, after World War II, the pattern of such antisemitic violence against Holocaust survivors was repeated all over formerly German-occupied Europe, including Paris.<sup>79</sup>

The Kielce Pogrom of 1946 constituted a shock that convinced many Holocaust survivors to leave Poland.<sup>80</sup> Others decided to move west to the German territories east of the Oder-Neisse line, which at the Postdam Conference, the wartime Allies had granted to Poland. It was decided to build a Jewish Autonomous Region, a socialist Yishuv (יִשׁוּב or *osiedle* ‘settlement’ in Polish), in the south of Lower Silesia, on the border with Czechoslovakia.<sup>81,82,83</sup> But as early as 1948, this dream also vanished into the thin air. Communist Poland was to be a nation-state for ethnic – Polish-speaking and Catholic – Poles only. Poles of the Jewish religion were to blend in, especially to forget Yiddish and to learn how to speak and write “proper Polish.”<sup>84</sup> No emigration was allowed, the country’s frontiers militarized and effectively sealed.<sup>85</sup> An increasingly paler shadow of the Lower Silesian Yishuv survived

<sup>75</sup> Anna Bikont, *Cena. W poszukiwaniu żydowskich dzieci po wojnie* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2022).

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (London: Arrow, 2003).

<sup>77</sup> Paweł Piotr Reszka, *Pluczki. Poszukiwacze żydowskiego złota* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Agora, 2019).

<sup>78</sup> Jan Tomasz Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>79</sup> Jean-Pierre Azéma ed., *Vivre et survivre dans le Marais. Au coeur de Paris du Moyen âge à nos jours* (Paris: Manuscrit, 2005), 468.

<sup>80</sup> Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Pod klątwą. Społeczny portret pogromu kieleckiego* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, 2018).

<sup>81</sup> Gabriel Berger, *Umgeben von Hass und Mitgefühl. Jüdische Autonomie in Polen nach der Shoah 1945–1949 und die Hintergründe ihres Scheiterns* (Berlin: Lichtig Verlag, 2016).

<sup>82</sup> Tamara Włodarczyk ed., *Ku nowemu życiu. Żydzi na Dolnym Śląsku w latach 1945–1970 / Towards New Life: Jews in Lower Silesia in 1945–1970*, trans. by Elżbieta Macauley (Wrocław: Muzeum Narodowe we Wrocławiu, 2017).

<sup>83</sup> Anna Gruźlewska, *Polska Jeruzolima. Fenomen żydowskiego osiedla w powiecie dzierzoniowskim 1945–1950: Polish and English Version[s]*, trans. from the Yiddish by Bela Flajs, Kamil Kijek and Yehoshua Ecker; trans. from the Hebrew by Kamil Kijek and Yehoshua Ecker, trans. into English by Yehoshua Ecker (Dzierżoniów: Studio „Art In Design SOVA”, 2019).

<sup>84</sup> Jacob Egit, *Grand Illusion* (Toronto: Lugus, 1991).

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Dariusz Stola, *Kraj bez wyjścia? Migracje z Polski 1949–1989* (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej – Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu and PAN Instytut Studiów Politycznych, 2012).

until the late 1960s.<sup>86</sup> When, in the course of de-Stalinization, relative openness set in during the latter half of the 1950s, many Poles of the Jewish religion or extraction decided to use this rare opportunity to leave Poland.<sup>87</sup> Meanwhile, Yiddish-language libraries and lending sections were liquidated and their holdings pulped.<sup>88</sup> A decade later, in 1968, the Polish government took the decision to bolster its legitimacy by embarking on the ethnic cleansing of the country's "remaining Jews" (*Syjniści*,<sup>89</sup> literally 'Zionists') even if they maintained that they were Poles, did not attend synagogue and no longer knew any Yiddish.<sup>90</sup> It was the communist-cum-national Polish authorities' prerogative to establish who was a "Jew," "non-Pole," or "alien" that needed to be summarily expelled.<sup>91</sup>

After the Katastrofe, for a while Warsaw appeared to be a kind of safe haven for Yiddishland. The Polish capital was home to the then world's largest Yiddish-language publishing house, namely, the Yidish Bukh (יִיִדיש בוך). In 1956, the period of de-Stalinization, known as the Thaw, brought national communists to power, heralding the dusk of "non-Polish" Jewish organizations. The aforementioned publishing house was finally liquidated in the course of the 1968 antisemitic ethnic cleansing.<sup>92</sup> Ironically, the hallmark of communist Poland's book industry was the sought-for *Wielka encyklopedia powszechna PWN* (PWN Great Universal Encyclopedia).<sup>93</sup> It was none other than Adam Bromberg (אדם בראַםבערג 1912–1993), who conceived of

<sup>86</sup> Włodarczyk, *Ku nowemu życiu*.

<sup>87</sup> Ewa Węgrzyn, *Wyjeżdżamy! Wyjeżdżamy?! Alija gomulłowska 1956–1960* (Ser: Polscy Żydzi. Studia i Teksty, Vol. 1) (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Austeria Klezmerhojs, 2016).

<sup>88</sup> Marcin Szydzisz, *Spółeczność żydowska na Dolnym Śląsku w świetle działalności Towarzystwa Społeczno-Kulturalnego Żydów w Polsce w latach 1950–1989* (Ser: Historia Dolnego Śląska) (Wrocław: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej – Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu. Oddział we Wrocławiu, 2019), 200–204.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Łukasz Gajda, "‘Jak się nie podoba, to won z Polski!’ Kampania antysemitcka 1968 r.," *Kurier Historyczny*, March 24, 2018, accessed December 12, 2020. <https://kurier.historyczny.pl/artykul/jak-sie-nie-podoba-to-won-z-polski-kampania-antysemitcka-1968-r,308>.

<sup>90</sup> Justyna Koszarska-Szulc and Natalia Romik, eds., *Obcy w domu. Wokół Marca '68 / Estranged: March '68 and Its Aftermath*, trans. from the Polish by Zofia Sochańska-Kumor (Warsaw: Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich POLIN, 2018).

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Andrzej Friszke, "Prozachodnia liberalizacja czy prosowiecki nacjonalizm. Wokół genezy Marca '68," *Więź*, March 8, 2019, accessed December 12, 2020, <https://wiesz.pl/2019/03/08/prozachodnia-liberalizacja-czy-prosowiecki-nacjonalizm-wokol-genezy-marca-68/>.

<sup>92</sup> Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow, "Kilka uwag o wydawnictwie Idisz Buch," in *Nusech Pojln. Studia z dziejów kultury jydysz w powojennej Polsce*, ed. Magdalena Ruta (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Austeria, 2008).

<sup>93</sup> *Wielka encyklopedia powszechna PWN* (13 vols.) (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1962–1970).

this multivolume reference. Between 1956 and 1969, he headed the PWN (*Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe*, State Scientific Publishing House), and made it into the biggest publishing house in communist Poland. For all these achievements, Bromberg was imprisoned and later expelled from Poland as a Jew in the course of the 1968 ethnic cleansing. The main ideological accusation was that he allowed for presenting the Holocaust of Jews in this encyclopedia as an event in its own right, rather than toed the communist authorities' dogma that nazi Germany had been murdering Jews as a mere part of the plan to exterminate all the Poles.<sup>94</sup> Bromberg and his family received political asylum in Sweden, where they founded a successful *Brombergs bokförlag* (Bromberg Publishing House). The company made its fortune by publishing the Swedish translations of Isaac Bashevis Singer's (יצחק באשעוויס זינגער, 1902–1991) Yiddish-language novels<sup>95</sup> and short stories.<sup>96</sup> Serendipitously, Bromberg discovered Singer for Swedish readers *before* the latter received a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1978.<sup>97</sup>

## And what now?

Both, Singer and Bromberg, were fellow Yiddish-speaking Warsawians (וואַרשערעס *Varsheres*). None has been appreciated in Poland as they should. In 1935 Singer left Warsaw for New York, just in time to escape the Holocaust. However, he *never* left Yiddishland. Singer just moved from this invisible country's old capital to the new one.<sup>98</sup> In Poland he is considered to be an American writer, Singer's Polishness still denied to him even post-humously.<sup>99,100</sup> The Yiddish-speaking וואַרשע *Varshe* of Singer and Bromberg is

<sup>94</sup> Tomasz Stańczyk, "Atak na 'encyklopedystów'," *Rzeczpospolita*, October 13, 2008, accessed January 11, 2021, <https://www.rp.pl/artykul/204327-Atak-na-encyklopedystow-.html>.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Trollkarlen från Lublin*, trans. from English into Swedish by Caj Lundgren (Uppsala: Bromberg, 1978).

<sup>96</sup> "Det lilla förlaget med de stora författarna," 2020, accessed December 12, 2020, <https://brombergs.se/om-forlaget/historia/>.

<sup>97</sup> Henryk Grynberg, *Memorbuch* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2018).

<sup>98</sup> Agata Tuszyńska, *Lost Landscapes: In Search of Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Jews of Poland*, trans. from the Polish by Madeline G. Levine (New York: William Morrow, 1998).

<sup>99</sup> Cf. "Lista laureatów Nagrody Nobla związanych z Polską: Pozostali laureaci mający znaczące związki z Polską," in *Wikipedia*, 2020, accessed December 9, 2020, [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lista\\_laureatów\\_Nagrody\\_Nobla\\_związanych\\_z\\_Polską#Pozostali\\_laureaci\\_mający\\_znaczące\\_związki\\_z\\_Polską](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lista_laureatów_Nagrody_Nobla_związanych_z_Polską#Pozostali_laureaci_mający_znaczące_związki_z_Polską).

<sup>100</sup> "Nobliści, do których Polska się nie przyznaje...", *Gazeta.pl Forum*, 2016, accessed December 12, 2020, [https://forum.gazeta.pl/forum/w,567,160414825,160414825,Nobliści\\_do\\_których\\_Polska\\_sie\\_nie\\_przyznaje\\_.html](https://forum.gazeta.pl/forum/w,567,160414825,160414825,Nobliści_do_których_Polska_sie_nie_przyznaje_.html).



forgotten, pushed out from the memory of the present-day Warsawians. Communist and anti-communist Polish-Catholic nationalists have won. Almost.

During the last decade or so, many open-minded young Poles-Catholics with an interest in history have been surprised to find out that in their localities Poles-Jews used to constitute a considerable percentage of the inhabitants prior to the Holocaust. The new generation misses their lost, forgotten, persecuted, expelled, murdered sisters and brothers, whose only crime was their Jewish religion, and a predilection for speaking and reading in Yiddish.<sup>101</sup> Surviving Jewish activists welcomed this interest and decided to cater to it through a Jewish Open University (ידיש עפענען אוניווערסיטעט *Yidish Efenen Universitet*, or in Polish: *Żydowski Uniwersytet Otwarty*) that they founded in 2006.<sup>102</sup> Isn't the Yiddish language as much Polish in a cultural and historical sense as the Polish language itself? Why not to see the Jewish religion at long last to be on an equal footing with Catholicism in Poland, as actually time and again officially provided by the successive Polish Constitutions?

Between 2009 and 2011, the grassroots movement of about 30,000 users and contributors created a Virtual Shtetl website of Poland's Jewish and Yiddish past that boasts over 80,000 entries.<sup>103</sup> For a long time, the Jewish Theater (ידיש טעאטער *Yidisher Teater*) in Warsaw (founded in 1950), was Poland's main institution of Jewish and Yiddish culture surviving in Poland after the tragic antisemitic events of the 1968.<sup>104</sup> Nowadays, this theater's premises also house the Center for Yiddish Culture (צענטער פאר יידישער קולטור *Tsenter far yidisher kultur*, or in Polish: *Centrum Kultury Jidysz*)<sup>105</sup> and the aforementioned Jewish Open University. Perhaps, the world's best museum of Jewish culture and history located outside Israel is POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews (מוזיי פון דער געשיכטע פון פוילישע יידן *Muzey fun der Geshikhte fun Poylishe Yidn*), which was founded in 2005 and opened its

<sup>101</sup> Rafał Betlejowski, "Tęsknię za Tobą Żydzie – dramat kryminalny w dwóch aktach," 2020 [video], accessed December 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-eg3vyomf0>.

<sup>102</sup> "Żydowski Uniwersytet Otwarty," 2021, accessed January 11, 2021, <http://shalom.org.pl/zydowski-uniwersytet-otwarty/>.

<sup>103</sup> "Nowy Wirtualny Sztetl," Warsaw: Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich POLIN and Stowarzyszenie Żydowski Instytut Historyczny w Polsce, 2009–2019, accessed December 9, 2020, <https://sztetl.org.pl/pl/o-projekcie>.

<sup>104</sup> "60 lat Państwowego Teatru Żydowskiego," Miasto Stołeczne Warszawa, 2010, accessed January 11, 2021, [www.kulturalna.warszawa.pl/wiadomosci,1,508,60\\_lat\\_Państwowego\\_Teatru\\_Żydowskiego.html?locale=pl\\_PL](http://www.kulturalna.warszawa.pl/wiadomosci,1,508,60_lat_Państwowego_Teatru_Żydowskiego.html?locale=pl_PL).

<sup>105</sup> "Center for Yiddish Culture (CKJ): Established on the Initiative of the Shalom Foundation Currently, It operates Within the Jewish Theater-Center for Yiddish Culture," 2021, accessed January 11, 2021, <http://jidyszland.pl/en/about-us/>.

door to the public nine years later. Suitably, it is located on the territory of the former Warsaw Ghetto.<sup>106</sup> In this manner, the museum brings back to the present monolingual Polish-speaking Warsaw the sounds, tastes, views, culture, language and history of the other half of the Polish capital, that is, the semi-forgotten Yiddish-speaking וואַרשע *Varshe*. At present, this museum curates the Virtual Shtetl website. Its Yiddish-language version<sup>107</sup> – ווירטועל שטעטל *virtuel shtetl* – facilitates the process of reacquainting the monolingual Polish Warszawa with its vaguely remembered Yiddish half. Furthermore, this website's Yiddish version adds so much needed authenticity to the now less pale shadow of וואַרשע *Varshe*.<sup>108</sup>

But is that sufficient? If Catholic Warsovians and other Poles really believe that Yiddish-Jewish and Polish-Catholic dimensions are the two inseparable sides of the same coin of the millennium-long Polish history, then it is high time for moving from the online e-world of illusions to Warsaw's actual cityscape. As a first step in this process of recovering this suppressed Jewish past and identity of diverse Poland, full bilingual Yiddish-Polish signage could be seriously considered for unrolling across the territory of the former Warsaw Ghetto. Subsequently, this bilingual and biscriptal signage could be extended to other areas and streets associated with interwar וואַרשע *Varshe*.<sup>109</sup> In this manner, such streets as קרוךמאַלנאַ *krokhmalna* / Krochmalna, נאַלעווקעס *nalewkes* / Nalewki, or טלומאַצקע *tlomatske* / Tłomackie – immortalized in Isaac Bashevis Singer's books on the multi-ethnic Warsaw – could at long last return to their city of origin, to where they rightfully belong. Warsaw as the capital of Yiddishland is already late with this initiative. In 1992, on the sad occasion of the 500th anniversary of the expulsion of Jews from Sicily,<sup>110</sup> the Italian island's communes pledged to celebrate Sicily's multicultural past, including its Jewish and Arabic (Islamic) facets.<sup>111</sup> As a result, a decade

<sup>106</sup> "O muzeum," 2020, accessed December 9, 2020, <https://polin.pl/pl/o-muzeum>.

<sup>107</sup> Unfortunately, both Yiddish- and Hebrew-language content on Polin's website is not distinguished, all confusingly tagged with the same abbreviation "HE," which actually stands for "Hebrew."

<sup>108</sup> דאָס פאַרבעסערטע וועבזייטל פונעם ווירטועלן שטעטל *dos farbeserte vebzaytl funem virtueln shtetl*, 2020, accessed December 9, 2020, <https://sztetl.org.pl/he/khdshvt/das-prb%60s%60rt%60-vv%60bziatl-pvn%60m-vvyrtv%60ln-sht%60tl>.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. Jacek Leociak, *Biografie ulic. O żydowskich ulicach Warszawy od narodzin po Zagładę* (Warsaw: Dom Spotkań z Historią, 2017).

<sup>110</sup> Gary Drake, "Days of Awe in Siracusa," *Times of Sicily*, September 17, 2015, accessed January 11, 2021, <https://www.timesofsicily.com/days-of-awe-in-siracusa/>.

<sup>111</sup> Titta Lo Jacono de Malach, "L'Aron ha kodesh e la sinagoga di Agira. Un itinerario nel sacro ebraico nella Sicilia delle tre religioni," c 1996, accessed January 11, 2021, <https://studylibit.com/doc/1259593/l-aron-ha-kodesh>.

ago, in Palermo's old town the Italian-language street names received their counterparts in Hebrew and Arabic.<sup>112</sup>

Should the Polish capital follow this laudable example, it would become more attractive to tourists who, prior to visiting Warsaw, often read Singer's books or the famous Warsovian Polish-language writer, Bolesław Prus's, sprawling novel *The Doll* (1890),<sup>113</sup> as a kind of introduction to the city. This novel portrays the late 19th-century Warsaw teeming with Polish-speaking Catholics, Jews, German-speaking Lutherans, students, French-speaking aristocrats, and imperial Russophone civil servants. Yiddish-language writers never forgot about the multi-ethnic and polyconfessional Warsaw, or *וואַרשע* – *Варшава* – *Warschau* – *Varsovie*.<sup>114</sup> In communist Poland Polonophone-cum-Catholic homogeneity ruled supreme, including literature and culture. Symptomatically, nowadays it fell to none other than the ethnically Silesian<sup>115</sup> writer, Szczepan Twardoch, to recover the Yiddish past of interwar Warsaw in his bestseller novels, *Król*<sup>116</sup> (*The King of Warsaw*<sup>117</sup>) and *Królestwo* (*The Kingdom*).<sup>118,119</sup> In 2020, Canal+ released an equally popular television series *Król*, based on these two novels. This series' protagonists speak in Polish, Yiddish, German, and Russian.<sup>120</sup> The capital of Yiddishland is – however, tentatively – back in the midst of the multicultural European Union.

*December 2020 & December 2021*  
 דעצעמבער 2020 און דעצעמבער 2021  
*detsember 2020 un detsember 2021*

<sup>112</sup> “The Jewish Ghosts of Palermo,” *The Dangerously Truthful Diary of a Sicilian Housewife*, October 15, 2015, accessed January 11, 2021, <https://siciliangodmother.com/2015/10/15/the-jewish-ghosts-of-palermo/>.

<sup>113</sup> Bolesław Prus, *The Doll*, trans. from the Polish by David Welsh (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972).

<sup>114</sup> Hersh Dovid Nomberg, *Warsaw Stories*, trans. from the Yiddish by Daniel Kennedy (Amherst, MA: White Goat Press, 2019).

<sup>115</sup> Szczepan Twardoch, “Polacy, pamiętamy wam Zgodę,” *Wachtyrz*, November 20, 2020, accessed December 12, 2020, <https://wachtyrz.eu/szczepan-twardoch-polacy-pamietamy-wam-zgode/>.

<sup>116</sup> Szczepan Twardoch, *Król* (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2016).

<sup>117</sup> Szczepan Twardoch, *The King of Warsaw*, trans. from the Polish by Sean Gasper Bye (Seattle, WA: Amazon Crossing, 2020).

<sup>118</sup> Szczepan Twardoch, *Królestwo* (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2018).

<sup>119</sup> The sequel is already available in a German translation, see: Szczepan Twardoch, *Das schwarze Königreich*, trans. from the Polish by Olaf Kühn (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2020).

<sup>120</sup> *Król*. Serial fabularny, FilmPolski.pl, 2020, accessed December 12, 2020, <https://film.polski.pl/fp/index.php?film=1249664>.

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### **Warszawa i jidysz:**

#### **o niegdyś największym europejskim mieście żydowskim**

**Streszczenie:** Przed *Katastrofe* (jid. Holocaust) Warszawa była światową stolicą Jidyszlandu, czyli aszkenazyjskiej cywilizacji języka i kultury jidysz. Pod względem liczby ludności żydowskiej na przełomie XIX i XX wieku Nowy Jork prześcignął Warszawę. Z punktu widzenia instytucji oraz organizacji kulturalnych i politycznych Warszawa pozostała jednak centrum życia żydowskiego w Europie. Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia formowanie się Warszawy jako

takiego centrum, dzieje jego zniszczenia podczas II wojny światowej oraz częściowego odrodzenia się centrum po roku 1945, a następnie jego zaniknięcia, które zostało przypieczętowane antysemicką czystką etniczną ostatnich polskich społeczności żydowskich w roku 1968. Dwadzieścia lat po upadku komunizmu, począwszy od przełomu pierwszej dekady XXI wieku, czyli w ciągu ostatniej dekady, wykształciła się nowa świadomość żydowskiego wymiaru kultury i historii Warszawy oraz Polski. Stanowi to szansę na nowe otwarcie, na przyjęcie i pełną akceptację kultury żydowskiej, jidysz i judaizmu jako nieodłącznych elementów polskiej kultury i historii. Historia i kultura tego kraju nie zostały stworzone wyłącznie przez katolików, jak błędnie twierdzą etnonacjoniści, dlatego też niniejszy esej ma służyć jako korekta tego uprzedzenia naznaczonego przez alogiczny anachronizm polskiej narracji etniczno-nacjonalistycznej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** jidysz, nacjonalizm etnicznojęzykowy, polityka językowa, polityka pisma, Warszawa

#### **Warschau und Jiddisch:**

#### **Einiges über die einst größte jüdische Stadt in Europa**

**Zusammenfassung:** Vor der *Katastrophe* (jiddisch für „Holocaust“) fungierte Warschau als Welthauptstadt Jiddischlands oder der ashkenasischen Zivilisation der jiddischen Sprache und Kultur. In Bezug auf die absolute Anzahl jüdischer Einwohner überholte New York City um die Wende des 20. Jahrhunderts Warschau. Aus Sicht kultureller und politischer Institutionen und Organisationen blieb Warschau jedoch das Zentrum des jüdischen Lebens in Europa. Dieser Artikel bietet einen Überblick über den Aufstieg Warschaus als ein solches Zentrum, seine Zerstörung während des Zweiten Weltkriegs und die teilweise Wiederbelebung des Zentrums nach 1945, gefolgt von seiner Auslöschung, die mit der antisemitischen ethnischen Säuberung der letzten jüdischen Gemeinden in Polen 1968 besiegelt wurde. Zwanzig Jahre nach dem Fall des Kommunismus, beginnend um die Wende des ersten Jahrzehnts des 21. Jahrhunderts, hat sich im letzten Jahrzehnt ein neues Bewusstsein für die jüdische Facette der Kultur und Geschichte Warschaus und Polens entwickelt. Es ist eine Chance für eine neue Öffnung, für die Anerkennung der jüdischen Kultur, des Jiddischen und des Judentums als inhärente Elemente der polnischen Kultur und Geschichte. Die Geschichte und Kultur dieses Landes wurde nicht ausschließlich von Katholiken geschaffen, wie Ethnonationalisten gerne fälschlicherweise behaupten. Der Aufsatz soll daher als Korrektiv zu diesem anachronistischen Vorurteil dienen.

**Schlüsselwörter:** ethnolinguistischer Nationalismus, Jiddisch, Sprachpolitik, Schriftpolitik, Warschau

#### **Warsaw and Yiddish: Europe's Once Largest Jewish City**

**Summary:** Prior to the *Katastrophe* (Yiddish for ‘Holocaust’), Warsaw functioned as the world’s capital of Yiddishland, or the Ashkenazic civilization of Yiddish language and culture. In the terms of absolute numbers of Jewish inhabitants, at the turn of the 20th century, New York City surpassed Warsaw. Yet, from the perspective of cultural and political institutions

and organizations, Warsaw remained *the* center of Europe's Jewish life. This article offers an overview of the rise of Warsaw as such a center, its destruction during World War II, and the center's partial revival in the aftermath, followed by its extinction, which was sealed with the antisemitic ethnic cleansing of Poland's last Jewish communities in 1968. Twenty years after the fall of communism, beginning at the turn of the 2010s, a new awareness of the Jewish facet of Warsaw's and Poland's culture and history has developed during the past decade. It is a chance for a new opening, for embracing Jewish culture, Yiddish and Judaism as inherent elements of Polish culture and history. This country's history and culture was *not* created exclusively by Catholics, as ethnonationalists are wont to claim incorrectly. Hence, the essay is intended to serve as a corrective to this anachronistic preconception.

**Keywords:** ethnolinguistic nationalism, language politics, politics of script, Warsaw, Yiddish

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טאָמאַש דאָמיניק קאַמוסעללאַ איז אַ מיטאַרבעטער פּראָפּעסאָר אין מאָדערן געשיכטע אין דעם אוניווערסיטעט פון סט ענדרו, סקאָטלאַנד, וק. ער ספּעשאַלייזט אין די ינטערדיסציפּלינאַרי לערנען פון שפּראַך פּאָליטיק און נאַציאָנאַליזם אין מאָדערן סענטראַל אייראָפּע. די לעצטע אויסגאַבעס פון קאַמוסעללאַ אַרײַנגעמען די מאָנאָגראַפּס פּאָליטיק און די סלאַוויש שפּראַכן (2021), עוראַסיאַן אימפּעריעס ווי בלופּרינץ פֿאַר עטיאָפּיע (2021), עטניק קלענזינג בעשאַס די קאַלטקייט מלחמה (2018), צוזאַמען מיט די היסטאָרישע אַטלאַס ווערטער אין פּלאַץ און צײַט (2021).

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